

AKSHAY KUMAR JAIN A PIONEER IN HINDI CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

PRATIBHA NATH

Shri Akshay Kumar Jain has been a luminary in many fields of human activity. A renowned journalist, with a formidable reputation for just and fearless reporting. The editor of a leading Hindi daily for as long as 22 years, during this span of time he firmly put his paper on the map, making it synonymous with integrity in public life. An adviser to the echelons of power, a Hindi scholar and writer of great merit. A connoisseur of quality writing. A freedom fighter. A family man and friend who has reached out to everyone with affection and concern the list runs on. Just as well that this article concerns itself solely with Akshay Kumar Jain as a writer for children. It wouldn't have been possible to encompass all of his towering personality within the space of a single magazine article.

Jain Sahib insists that he did not set out to become a story teller. The children in his family drove him to it by their persistent demands for stories. Indeed his niece Mridula Garg, the noted Hindi writer, refers to him as her *Kisse kahani sunanewale phuphaji*. He regaled children with stories from the Arabian Nights in a manner that was truly unforgettable. To that extent Jain Sahib was living up to a family tradition. His father Shri Roop Kishore Jain, a zamindar from Vijaygarh, near Aligarh, was a well known scholar of no less than ten languages including Hindi, Urdu and Persian. He had translated Alif Laila (Arabian Nights) into Hindi under the name of *Sahastra Akhyani Manjari*. In his childhood Akshay Kumar Jain lived with uncles, aunts and cousins as part of a large, happy, joint family. And a good part of every night was fraught with the magic that his father wove out of his wonderful rendering of stories from Alif Laila. The same magic seems to permeate Jain Sahib's style as a story teller. It is colloquial and readable, being a happy blend of Hindi and Urdu words, free from verbiage yet alive with a sudden fresh and dramatic turn of phrase that makes you go back to a sentence and read it all over again. His stories are devoid of frills. They come straight from the heart and go to the heart.

Jain Sahib has a deep love for children. In his own words, "I love children. In their innocent smiles I see glimpses of a great and prosperous future for our country. It is my earnest desire that they should learn to love the land of their birth and be motivated to make sacrifices for it." As a result, his stories lead in a very definite direction. They create a respect for tradition. They highlight courage, both moral and physical courage in the face of war, oppression, and injustice. These stories uphold a singleness of purpose, grim determination and action, in short the whole gamut of emotions that swell the flood tide of patriotism. But rich though

they are in meaning, these stories are also highly entertaining. A difficult combination, to be achieved only by a consummate artist.

According to Jain Sahib, good children's literature identifies and caters to children's interests. It brings them the dual benefits of experience and knowledge so they reach out for a bright new future with their feet firmly planted on earth. That his own stories meet all these requirements is patent. *Munshiji ke Karname* is a very interesting account of a conman's slide downwards. While Munshiji thinks he is doing very well flicking baggage on trains, printing counterfeit notes, smuggling gold etc, he is actually getting more and more enmeshed in a dragnet of his own making. The person to nab him finally is Jai, a CID inspector who, as a child, had seen Munshiji in 'action' and has never forgotten the fact. All in all, a story rooted in the known and familiar environment of our daily life, hence easy to relate to and easy to learn from.

Jain Sahib has written a number of books on little known heroes of the freedom struggle. One of them *Bujhegi Nahin Mashal* makes use of a narrator, Miyan Nazir who provides a link between the different stories. And what memorable stories, of men and women like the intrepid Raja Devi Baksh Singh of Gonda, Azimulla Khan who started life as a poor illiterate menial at Kanpur and rose to be the brain behind the 1857 War of Independence. There is a heartwarming story about Azizan the dancing girl who acted as a spy for the Indian people and another about the incredibly young Lachhma who made history on the banks of the river Jhelum. *Hamare Paramvir Senani* details the exploits of the gallantry award winners among our servicemen. There are, among others, Lance Naik Karam Singh, Naik Jadunath Singh, Capt. Salaria and Maj. Somnath Sharma, each upholding courage and the best of Indian traditions.

In a charming, natural, effortless style *Kahanian Balidan Ki* and *Desh Prem ki Kahanian* revive memories of Alha Udal, the legendary hero fighting under the banner of Raja Parmal of Mahoba. The life of Prithviraj Chauhan emerges in its most romantic light—the mystique of his marriage, his feud with traitor Jaichand, the war with Shahabuddin Ghorī and the couplet by Prithviraj Chauhan's biographer, Chand Bardai, which enabled the defeated king to slay his enemy and in death levelled all.

In *Chhatrapati Shivaji*, the life and times of the great Maratha warrior-king are vividly brought to life. The treatment is candid but sympathetic, with a strong nationalist feeling surfacing at every step. A whole galaxy of great men appear in the two volumes *Desh Videsh ke Mahapurush* and *Vishv ke Mahapurush*. There are towering personalities like Buddha, Mahavir, Swami Vivekanand, Shri Aurobindo and Swami Dayanand who formed new faiths or reformed existing ones. There are giants among statesmen—Lincoln, Gandhi, Patel, Tilak, Lenin, and a host of others. The narration is direct and laced with anecdotes and holds one's interest from cover to cover.

But perhaps the most lovable of all these books is "*Aise The Jawahar*"—a deeply sensitive portrayal of the great man, warts and all. Nehru's life has been dealt with at length, along with his contribution to the national and international scene, his sincere overtures of friendship towards all, specially neighbouring nations, his Tibet policy which recognised China's suzerainty over Tibet, much against the general public opinion in India. Nehru's interest in the advancement of technology comes through clearly as does his deep love for children, in India and abroad. This book won the *Balpriya Puraskar* awarded by the AWIC in 1989 November Seminar. Akshay Kumar Jain was responsible for starting a children's

page 'Bal Bharat' in Navbharat Times. It was for children and partly by children. Any report connected with children's literature was given prominence in his paper, chiefly reports on the activities of the *Bharatiya Bal Sahitya Parishad*.

Akshay Kumar Jain wants to promote high ideals among children, to enable them to orga-

nise and discipline their future. At the same time he wishes them to grow independently of adults, where possible. The love, patience and tolerance he received as a child have moulded his whole attitude towards children. He does not bat an eyelid when his grandchildren play pranks. And once, in a jocular mood, he named his grandson 'Todu Phodu Ram'.

- *A gifted writer, a talented artist and an enterprising publisher need recognition and he/she must get it.*
- *Author and books must multiply to bring out refreshing literature for children.*
- *Masters repeat the messages.*